

# Dicing with the Divil

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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Litil Divil. What's the first question that springs to mind? In all the previews and reviews of Gremlin's cartoony RPG puzzler I've read, not once did the subject of the quirky name crop up. Apparently no-one else in the history of ever aside from me has ever wondered why it's not spelt Little Devil.

Were Gremlin trying to pull off a South African accent, or just make the game stand out from the crowd? There are no other games titled 'Little Devil' that I'm aware of, so it wasn't a case of making it unique for trademark purposes.

Should you be curious, 'litil' is Faroese for small (this North Germanic language was somewhat influenced by Irish settlers), and 'divil' is an Irish dialect variation of the more commonly used word, devil. The reason for emphasising the Irish connection will be elucidated soon enough.



Here's a radical idea, I could just ask someone who actually worked on the game, that might help. Animation guru and Art Director of the Mars on a Stick independent software studio, Jerr O'Carroll, tells me:-

"Lilil Divil was simply an Irish mother's thing that was said to kids, and it stuck in my head. You lilil divil!"

Whatever you care to call it, it must rank close to pole position for the old school game with the longest development cycle in history award. Not quite in the same league as Duke Nukem Forever of course, staggering nonetheless.

When it was first previewed in ACE and Zzap! in February 1991 work had already been underway in Gremlin's Irish division for nearly a year, aiming for a projected release date of Autumn 1991. Nevertheless, it wasn't until as late September 1994 when it finally emerged for the Amiga CD32.

In the meantime Liril Divil was showcased at four trade shows by different PR contingents, while development duties were batted between an array of talented creatives, the early assemblies fragmenting due to artists and coders departing the studios Gremlin commissioned to produce the game, or being reassigned to other internal projects.



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The extensive roster of associated names in no particular order include:-

- Ged Keaveney (original programmer/co-designer, also worked on the Heimdall series for Core Design, though as a freelance contractor via his own company, The 8th Day)
- John McLaughlin (PC programming, also designed the Maniac Mansion packaging and provided backdrops for Grim Fandango)
- Thomas Rolfs (programming infrastructure, went on to code several Command and Conquer titles and Emperor: Battle for Dune)
- Dominick Regan (PC programming, notably also contributed significantly to EA's Lord of the Rings series)
- Nicola Sedgwick (early development cycle graphics, also supplied artwork for Plan 9 From Outer Space on behalf of Pixel Productions)
- John Moore (animation assistance, also known for his work on Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell)
- Jerr O'Carroll (original artist who left Gremlin to move to Core Design mid-production to work on Heimdall, Team Suzuki and Premiere, later contributed to Heimdall 2 and Tomb Raider)
- Aidan Doolan, Kevin Doolan (animation assistance)
- Gavin Moran (animation assistance, subsequently contributed to a series of Disney and Gears of War games)
- Jason Dowling (original Amiga programming, formerly of Pixel Productions)
- Dennis Gleeson (original PC programming)
- Patrick Phelan (sound and music, supplied audio for many Gremlin titles before moving into games management/production)
- Phil Plunkett (graphics, also contributed to Plan 9 From Outer Space while still at Pixel Productions, and went on to work on Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets and Batman Begins)
- Aidan Walsh (animation, previously known for his work on the Teenage Mutant Hero Turtle TV series)

- Andrew McCabe (programming, later worked on Harry Potter, Simpsons and Call of Duty games)
- Adrian Carless (voices, some of which one reviewer likened to that of Captain Caveman, also provided voices for Shadow Fighter, and graphics for Golden Axe and Zool)
- Neil Biggin (sound and music, like Pat subsequently contributed audio towards many other Gremlin titles)
- The late Ian Hadley (production, Gremlin MD and founder of Pixel Productions after leaving Cinemaware, Mensa genius and Egghead)

All contributed to the finished product in one way or another, though not everyone is credited in-game, possibly because their input has subsequently been altered so radically it's barely recognisable.

Irish enterprises, Emerald Software and Pixel Productions (comprising several former Cinemaware employees), were originally drafted in to produce Liril Divil before being absorbed into Gremlin - the former relocating to Sheffield where Gremlin's HQ was based before the company was bought out by Infogrames in 1999 in a £24m deal, and the latter becoming Gremlin Ireland.



Initially, the brief was to create an A500 game, though it was soon realised that the project was more ambitious than the system's capabilities could accommodate and development languished while other titles took precedence.

Curious to discover precisely why Litol Divil took so long to finally be released, and why the project changed hands so often over the years, I put the question to Jerr...

"I honestly don't know! Once I was out of Gremlin, I had no contact.

I just looked through the vid link you sent, lol, I'd forgotten so much of it. So I can safely say I did the corridors and anims, though it appears that there's a turning corner sequence that I didn't do. And a few of the rooms. The spider room was an original room, I did that back in Waterford where I'm from. But I just saw a chessboard room that I did, and some of the platform graphics, but I guess it's been a long time!"

In another lightbulb moment I pondered to what extent the final graphics differ to the early concept work.

"The tunnels and surrounding UI and main character don't look to have changed at all TBH. The rooms I mentioned above are the same, but I'm guessing other ones were done in keeping with a coder's direction. So I can't really judge them."

With regards to his reasons for leaving Gremlin, Jerr explained...

"We met Jeremy Smith at a trade show in London, and we got talking. So basically when I left Gremlin, I simply went home, phoned him up and started on a game idea which became Heimdall."

Over the years it wasn't just the team who played musical chairs. The first draft of the plot was turned on its head, and even the designated platforms were switched.

It was estimated that a floppy Amiga version would occupy 16 disks so that idea was swiftly kicked into touch. The Atari ST port was canned for the same reason, though by the time *Lilil Divil* was ready, the platform was six feet under in any case. Ditto for the CDTV interpretation.

A SNES CD-ROM release was then touted - of course, that was a dead-end because there never *was* a CD-based SNES console. Sony - Nintendo's manufacturing partners - ultimately decided to go it alone unleashing the PlayStation, which I believe worked out rather well for them.





One proposed plot unveiled in the previews was a simple affair concerning your banishment to, and escape from hell, and proving to god that you're sufficiently righteous to earn your ascendance into heaven. This notion fell by the wayside perhaps because blending religious allegory with gaming wasn't advisable given the inevitably mixed beliefs of the intended audience.

Time passed and by the next preview the plot had evolved substantially. Incredulously, by April 1993 Amiga Action were referring to our protagonist, Mutt Divil, as Morris Axel-Ansell Dopolopagus, or Mad Mo for short. If there's a joke in there somewhere, I'm not in on it.



One day he discovers that the Lost City of the Underworld is located in his cellar and so naturally sets off to investigate. On reaching the gates of the Underworld Mo pauses to drink some water from a pool which, would you believe it only turns out to be *magic* water that transforms him into a Devil? We didn't get to discover what he was being transformed *from* unfortunately. The aim of the game then was to reach the Fountain of Normality somewhere beyond the passages of Terratis which would, well that's obvious isn't it.

Other previews referred to a quest to track down the Lost City of Atlantis, stumbling across a hieroglyphically carved slab while mooching around in your vegetable patch and slipping into a hole underneath it. Before you know it you're drinking morph juice once again.

I thought Jerr might have been involved with devising the plot, or know why some of the changes had been made to it along the way.

"No, just the original concept. I was working on some other projects at Gremlin which took up quite a bit of time. So for a while I wasn't even working on the game."

The final fairy tale rehash settled upon concerns the comically mundane aspiration to enter the Overworld via the Labyrinth of Chaos, acquire the Mystic Pizza of Plenty and return home to feed the Grand Council in the Chamber of the Ancients. As it happens this is an annual, treacherous pilgrimage embarked on by a nominated (well, literally short-strawed) individual who rarely returns alive to deliver the takeaway delicacy. This year you're the chosen one - lucky Mo! It might have been less traumatic to ring Domino's. Ah well, we live and learn.

We all know game plots tend to be throw away, bolted on at the last minute contrivances, so why not have some fun with

the trope? After all, it's the game itself that counts, isn't it?

So what exactly does that entail? Essentially it's an interactive slapstick cartoon in the mould of visual feasts such as Dragon's Lair, albeit with a greater degree of control over the leading man, I mean hell-hound. You know what I mean.



Liril Divil's Wikipedia entry states that:-

"The character was created by a student from Cann Hall Primary School as part of a nationwide competition. The schoolboy, William Cummings, received the first copy of the finished product as a reward for winning the competition."

As noted by Aaron Doughty in his video review of the game, there's no evidence online whatsoever that this is even remotely true. So to get to the bottom of the tall tale I asked Jerr who was one of the first creatives to help shape the much-belated finished product. In fact, in one Amiga magazine preview (The One issue 54, March 1993) of the then-upcoming project, Litol Divil was said to be Jerr's 'brainchild', so who better to set the record straight?

"Aye, that story's a load of...! I was working for a company in Southern Ireland where I'd just finished the old Moonwalker game on the Amiga. I started Litol Divil as a bit of fun between projects. Ian Stewart and James North-Hearn were dealing with us as far as I remember from Gremlin. Emerald Software who I was working for shutdown and they asked me to move to Sheffield to finish the game."



"What I'd done for the demo was the tunnel sequences, the main character anims and a giant spider on a web room. I had other designs done before me and Gremlin parted ways. So there ya go. There was no school kid involved! LOL."

Aaron's tingling Spidey-sense was spot on then. Absolutely priceless! It just goes to reinforce what we know deep down, yet often forget for the sake of convenience - don't believe everything you read on Wikipedia.

I imagined he'd be at least a bit miffed having been entirely written out of the game's history.

"No, not really. Bosses do that all the time. Someone leaves, they take away reference to what you've done, It happens. I know what I've done, and when you told me that there's a story on Wikipedia about a school kid coming up with it etc, all I did was laugh. Bygones."

Noting that the protagonist seems to be a sort of Muttley-Tasmanian Devil hybrid, I wondered if either of these characters served as inspiration for Jerr.

"When I left art college I got a lucky break and went to work for Don Bluth who opened a studio in Dublin, making 2D films like All Dogs Go To Heaven and The Land Before Time etc.

While working on All Dogs, I worked on a sequence where the main character goes to hell and is surrounded by lots of vile little demons, which is what gave me the inspiration when I was working on the Lital Divil idea."

Honing in on the doughy dish sees you traverse five labyrinthine levels, each containing ten rooms, solving the puzzles found therein to open up the next section of the maze. That and lots and lots and lots of stomping back and forth through an endless series of bewildering tunnels periscoped into a tiny central display window, chock-full of both covert and conspicuous traps. Hey, at least there's some graph paper included in the box to chart your progress dungeon crawler style.



*Travelodge has really let itself go since I last visited.*

Solving many of the puzzles hidden behind locked doors demands that you employ a conglomeration of items purchased from shops (referred to in the manual as 'goodies rooms') using the gold coins you find scattered throughout your junket (and somehow deposit inside your tail?).





*Shop 'til you drop - you'll need it all at some point so don't penny-pinch.*

Food - serving as an energy booster - also litters the terrain to counteract the damage inflicted by the menagerie of creatures fixated on your untimely demise. That said, you never actually die, rather you are teleported back to the last restore point to try again. Something which occurs all too often, not least because your energy depletes incessantly regardless of the relentless Looney Toons style GBH you endure.



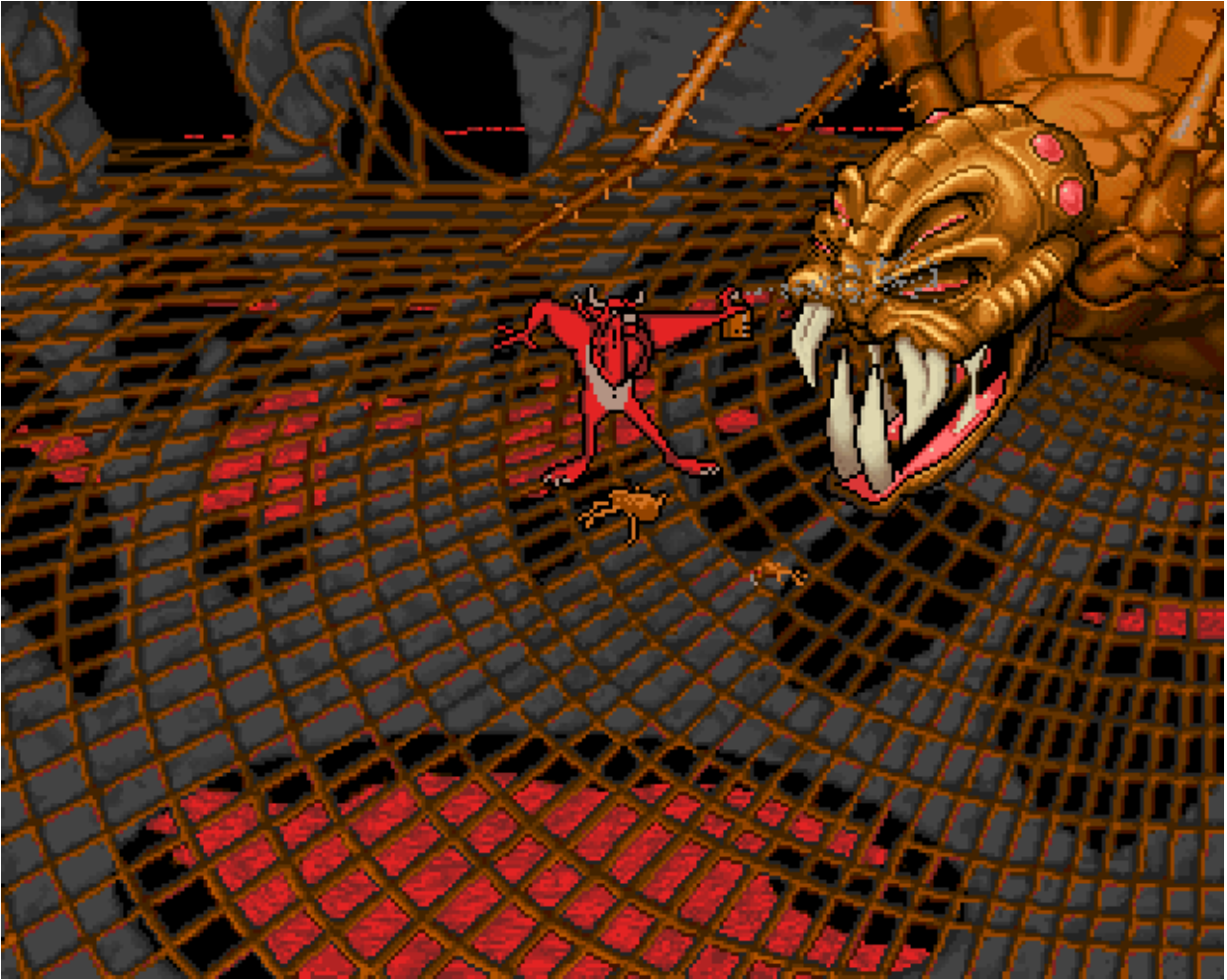
*Speak of the devil... still, better the one you know I suppose.*

If we're to be reductionist, what's on offer is a series of mini-games of widely varying difficulty buried deep within a cavernous dungeon, artificially separated by a convoluted means of access.



*Who'd-a-thunk poking a ferocious troll with a stick could end badly?*

Some oblige you to manipulate switches to bring about desired effects, or dispatch foes using very specific weapons. The club-wielding, bridge-blocking trolls are a comical diversion, though most memorable is the gargantuan four-eyed spider you're obliged to decapitate using insect repellent purchased from the shop. Doing so earns you a snazzy torch keepsake you can use to illuminate your face to scare away the natives Blair Witch style, so well worth the hassle I'm sure you'll agree. Any - comparatively speaking - *baby* spiders coughed up from its bowels can be squished underfoot, or even eaten if you're feeling a tad peckish.



Other puzzles revolve around hopping on objects in a preordained sequence, a la the copycat game, Simon, only here we're bouncing on guppies as instructed by a mermaid. Thrown in for good measure, there's even a hellish twist on Bubble Dizzy, and a tennis match featuring a sprog who does a tremendous impersonation of Suzy from the '80s Trio TV ads!





One particularly inventive conundrum involves removing wooden slats lodged above a furnace, allowing it to burn through a rope-pulley system holding a weight rigged to a door. When the weight falls, the door opens revealing an anvil you can hurl to squish a green glow worm. If it's not clear how this advances your errand to recover the sacred edible frisbee, all I can say is you need to dial back the force field over your absurdity absorption unit, and embrace the madness. It's for your own good.

What else? Oh, there's that old party favourite where the mega-demon hides an eyeball under one of three skulls, mixes them up via telekinesis and you have to guess where it is. Classic!



Explosive life-sized Bomberman chess is a riot. You have to predict where the magician riding the giant eyeball will move next and plant timed bombs accordingly, dodging the morphing salt monsters that emerge from the board as you go along.

Then this one time... at hell camp, I got to play airborne Frogger. Instead of a river you cross a gaping chasm, hopping on levitating stone discs rather than logs, while attempting to avoid the arrows fired by a Dr Doom-Green Lantern hybrid death-bringer sporting a bum-bag. All in aid of winning a shield, which will come in handy for a later tete-a-tete.





Dawdle too long at your peril. Before you have chance to cry over spilt molten lava you're rudely and unceremoniously yojked back into the Never Ending Tunnels of Tedium.

A shinobi shozoku garbed ninja (a demonic overlord known as 'The Entity') greets us and we're cast through a fiery portal in the floor, presumably back into the flame-grilled gaping mouth of Hades.

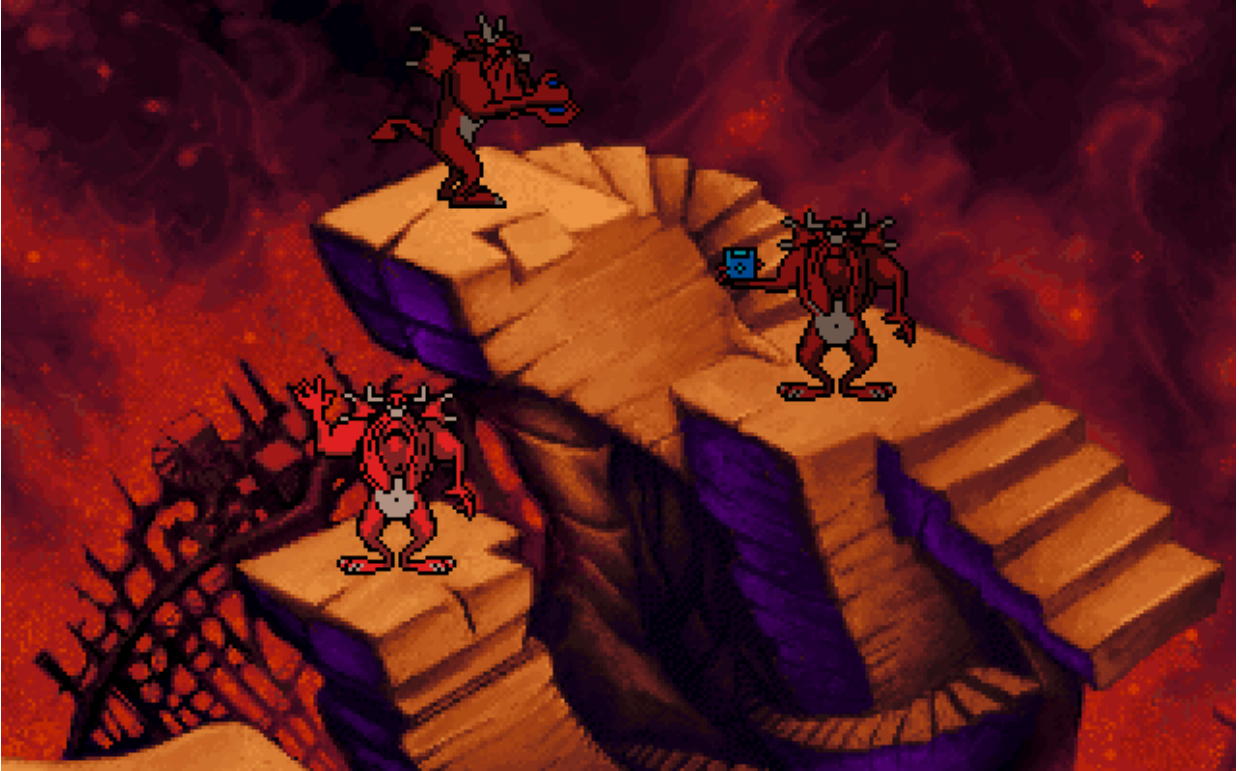


The next thing we know the sumo wrestler we're required to burst with a giant sewing pin in one of the skirmish set-pieces has us strapped to a Judas Chair in preparation to torture the hell out of (or *into?*) us.



Yokozuna whips out his slingshot and pelts a rock into the camera lens obliterating our view. Finally, we transition to a scene depicting Mutt in triplicate atop an M.C. Escher-esque Relativity staircase. One devil tussles with a joystick, another flips a floppy disk into the air, while the third waves us goodbye.

Welcome to the options menu. Novel isn't it? As with the rest of the luscious artwork, lovingly handcrafted with one of those ancient pencil devices, and papyrus no less. Literally it's to die for.



*Don't adjust your eyeballs! You really are seeing triple.*

Assuaging the threat somewhat, you can save your game at the end of each level or by locating a designated save game room wherein you take an impromptu siesta. You're an amateur competitive sleeper apparently.



Though time is your sworn enemy, suffer a defeat in one of the duel or puzzle rooms and you get the opportunity to instantly retry the scenario, so it's not nearly as punishing as it might have been otherwise.

There's estimated to be 100 hours worth of gameplay on offer, though World of Longplays demonstrates that a competent player can complete Litil Divil in just over 3 hours.

Two months before the CD32 version landed, a 32 colour floppy disk DOS edition hit retailer's shelves. It was delivered on 9 high-density disks with a capacity of 1.44mb each as opposed to the Amiga's 880kb standard.

A PC CD-ROM edition followed adding additional cutscenes and puzzle rooms, along with a translation for the Philips CD-i featuring an FMV intro previously unseen by CD32 owners, who also missed out on a couple of sleep animations owing to the console's limited RAM availability.

Liril Divil has since been Steamed and GOGed, and hence made available on modern platforms.

The various incarnations were said to have been produced using an Amiga 3000 and Deluxe Paint, though also mostly developed on a PC. I suppose the point is, when a game remains a work in progress for this long, design techniques and tools fluctuate with current trends and the preference of the teams involved.

Contrary to typical 'by the numbers' CD32 releases, Liril Divil really pushes the hardware to its limits. It features a vibrant palette of 256 colours, 1800 intricately detailed animations for Mutt alone, a cinematic CD score, amusing sampled, digitised sound effects and a whopping 30mb worth of game data.

Listening to the soundtrack you could easily imagine a full orchestra has assumed squatter's rights in your bedroom... and packed up the whole ensemble and shipped out five minutes later.

It's not dissimilar to what you might expect from the light, fluffy segments of a Disney animated movie. Pleasant enough, not especially rousing. Watching Satan's spawn snooze docilely to the mellow, undulating tones of a soothing lullaby is the deliciously absurd highlight.

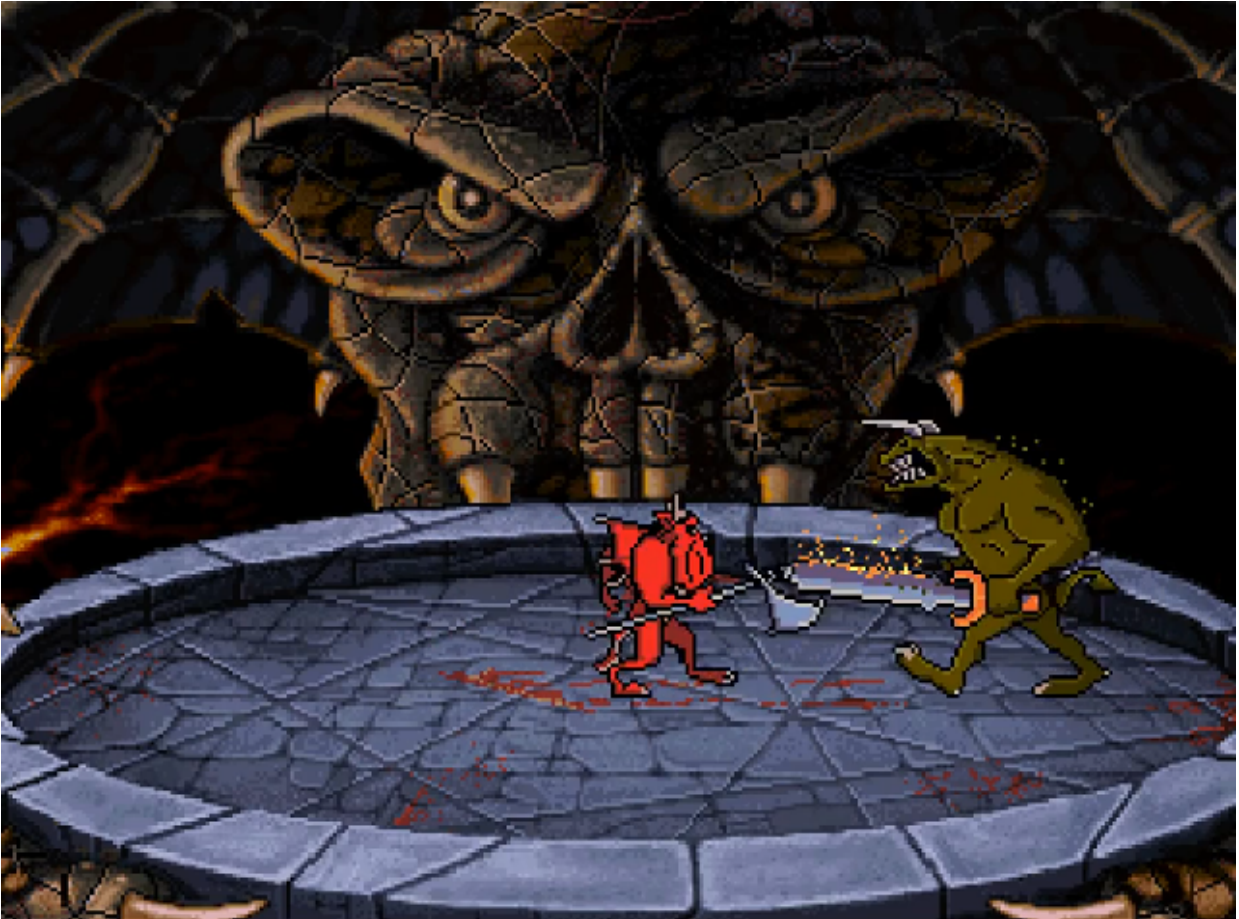




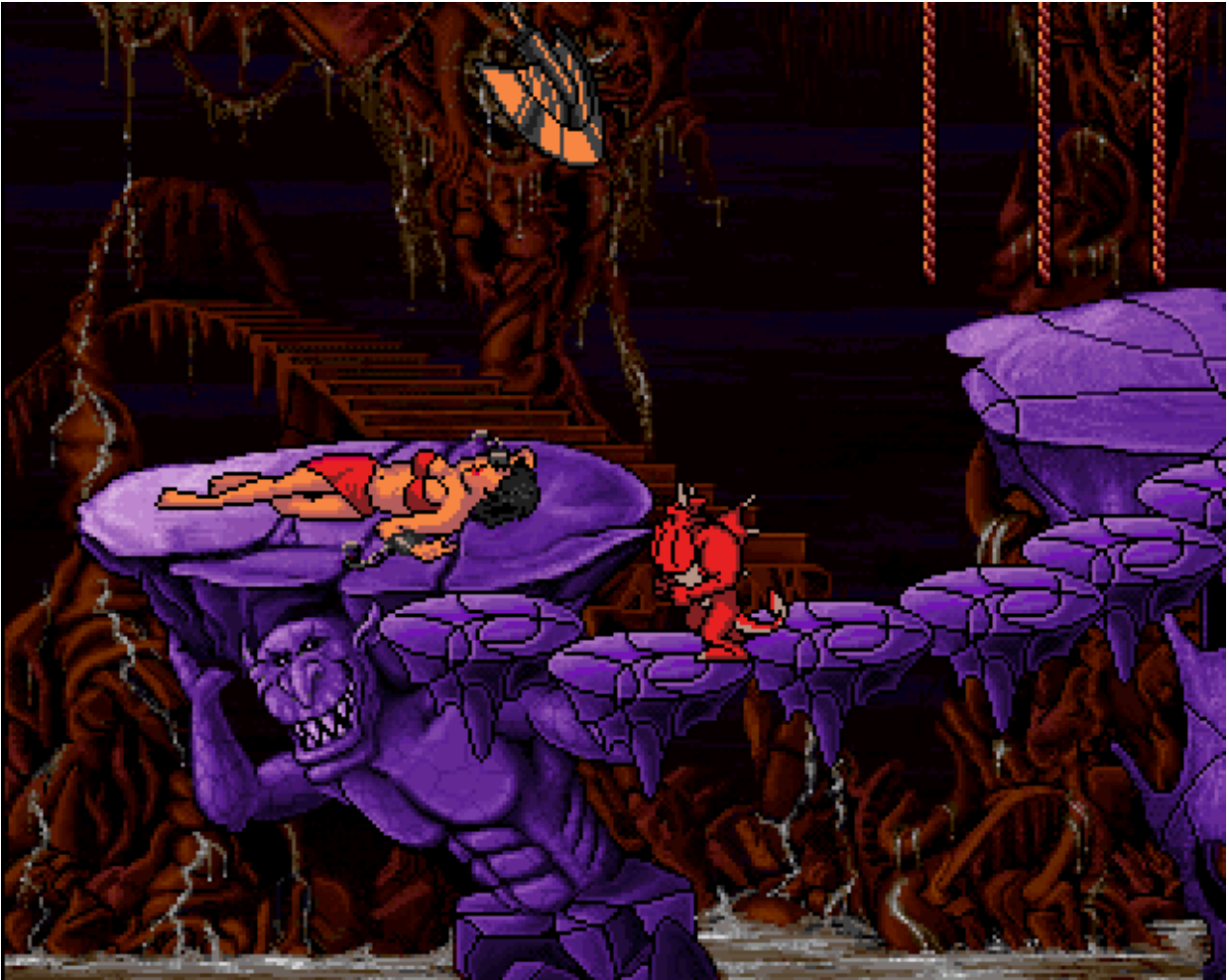
*I think this one's beyond beauty sleep.*

In a similar vein, some of the musical interludes that frame your tunnel reconnaissance would seem right at home in an Andrex TV commercial starring wide-eyed innocent labrador puppies. I can't listen to it without picturing the little bundles of joy bounding about blissfully on a thick pile carpet, playing tug of war with an unravelled toilet roll and crashing into one another. Blend that with the netherworldly damnation motif and you can't help revel in the droll dissonant buffoonery.

In terms of gameplay it also builds upon the inaugural DOS version by introducing the ability to spin round to exit rooms naturally, your environment rotating accordingly, rather than by walking backwards, which was awkward to say the least.



Believe it or not all these puzzle-solving and tunnel-schlepping shenanigans have been building up to a junk food crescendo of epic proportions. What's behind the final mystery door is a slime-tinted gurning horned demon armed with The Great Sword of War, which only making matters worse happens to be of the flaming variety. At least you've showed up to the joust prepared with a Battle Axe so you may not be turned into a diced-demon pizza topping after all. Sneak in enough crafty jabs here and there and he keels over, crumpling into a ready to roll demon rug.



The damsel in distress you rescued (and then transmogrified into a doorway) in an earlier brain-scratcher, scoops you up in an appreciative embrace and lays the mother of all lip-smackers square on your chops, just before the happy couple head off into the sunset (well, *pizzaset* technically speaking) together hand in hand.

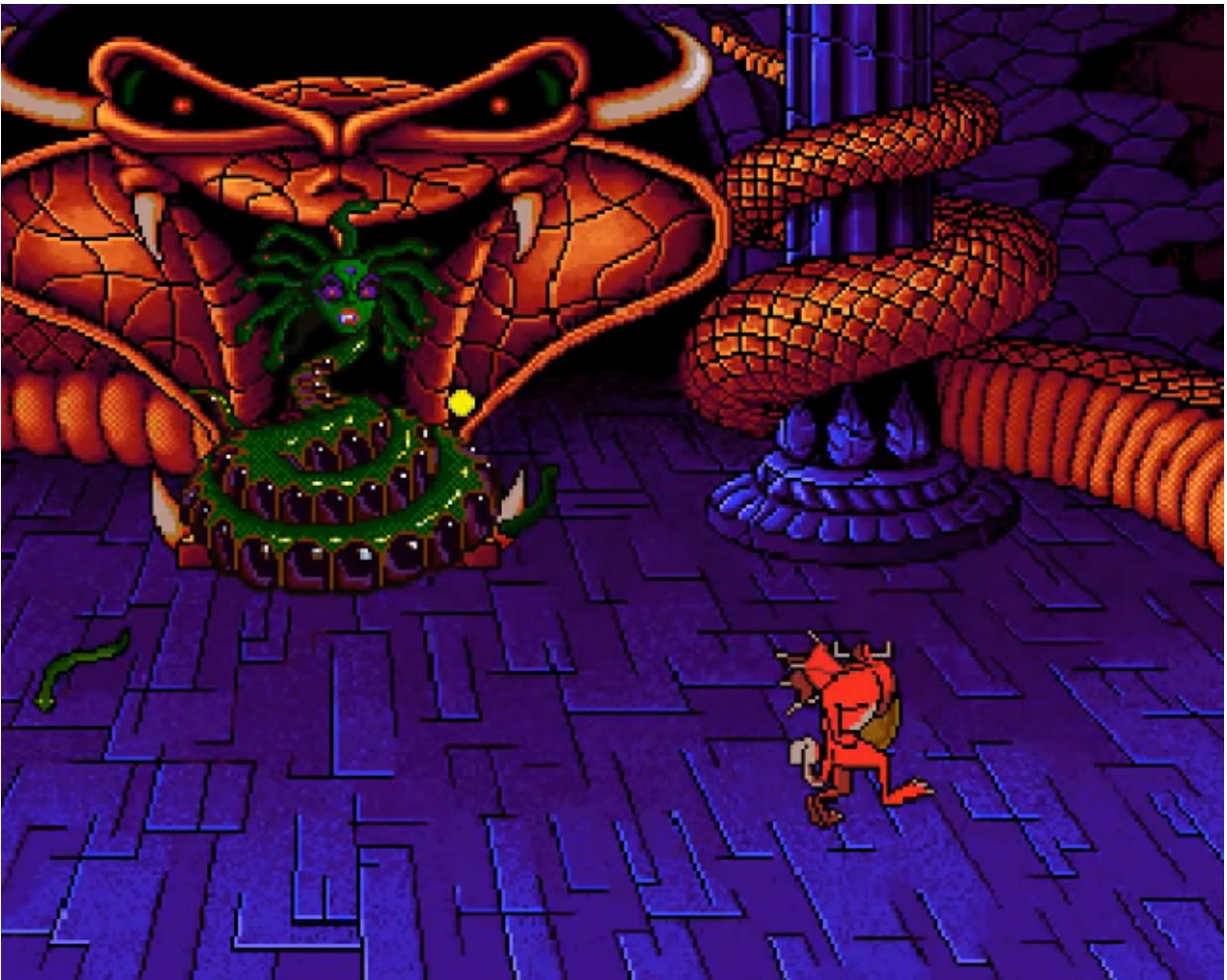


Awwww, that's cute. I love a happy ending.





But wait! What's this? Just then, unbeknownst to Mutt, she turns to snarl at the camera revealing a Medusa-style serpent hairdo and malevolent glint in her eyes. Hang on a minute. Didn't we send Medusa back from whence she came by reflecting her own ping pong balls into her scaly noggin a couple of sub-games ago?



Ah, of course, I geddit. It's obvious, don't you see?

A sequel to Lil' Devil was planned subtitled 'Limbo Years: Return to Cybercity', some gorgeous concept artwork was produced, yet the game never came to fruition.

Critical reception oscillated between love, hate and outright despair. While we'd struggle to find anyone who wasn't

impressed by Lital Divil's charm, endearing personality, sense of humour and immaculate presentation, reviewers were less enamoured with the clunky controls, repetitive, limited and frustrating gameplay.

PC Gamer were amongst the most positive where the DOS version is concerned reaching a final score of 86%, while Computer Gaming World must have thought they'd been smoking something hallucinogenic when they swung to the opposite extreme levying a pitiful 40% verdict.

Video Games & Computer Entertainment's CD-i critic appreciated the humour so much he ROFLed all the way to a 90% punchline. Electronic Gaming Monthly weren't quite so amused, only stretching to a shrugtastic 65% summation.

Scores were equally Marmitey in Amigaland. Amiga CD32 Gamer came close to popping the big question proffering their 90% assessment as a substitute ring. They were blown away by almost everything - spectacular puzzle rooms, hilarious animations, brilliant cinematic soundtrack - except the excessively repetitive dungeon trawling, and back to the drawing board restart points.

CU Amiga settled on a middle of the road 79%, Amiga Power a paltry 22% owing to its simple-minded, repetitive and unfair mechanics, whilst a nonchalant 70% represented Amiga Format's two penneth worth.

The sum of its aesthetic parts is a work art that would rival any TV cartoon franchise of the era. Where it begins to unravel at the seams is in the implementation of the crucial interactive element, which isn't remotely as engaging as you'd have hoped.

Unlike art, gaming isn't a passive medium and thus we'd expect more than an ephemeral show-piece for £35. The



upshot is a demiurgic oxymoron; a mediocre game everyone involved should be thoroughly proud to have contributed to.